

Year C-Easter3-2019-The Importance of Looking Up

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Revelation 5:11-14

The Importance of Looking Up

In the last two weeks my thinking has expanded by a notch and suddenly my imagination has kicked in, much to my surprise. This is new for me since for reasons I don't understand I renounced fantasy and non-historical story-telling at an early age, I would guess six or seven. This more vivid imagination announced itself with last week's "funky" sermon that ended with my speculation that the clouds Jesus comes back to us on could be Apple, Microsoft, and Google electronic clouds. Because the electronic cloud allows for the transmission of data, words, images and music electronically, creating a virtual reality, it seemed to me that the message of Jesus could be everywhere simultaneously without resorting to magic or metaphysics.

This means if Jesus' message of peace, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation could arrive on the human scene just as it looks utterly hopeless to us, as we reach our "Avenger: End Game" impasse, maybe we humans would be ready to receive his message. At least for me, that line of thought forces the eye of my imagination upward to where the heavens are opened and I see Jesus, now ascended, sitting at the right hand of God. With this vision enlivening my mind I feel myself joining the voices in Revelation and singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Yes, it is important to look up particularly when looking around without looking up can so easily lead to despair.

I notice John of Patmos, otherwise known as John the Seer, looked up and heard the voices of many angels surrounding the throne of God. Included were the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice. As I read this I decided to engage my newly enhanced imagination. Have any of you ever gotten fascinated by all the different life forms that have inhabited this earth? Creatures have existed in every conceivable shape, and some I wouldn't conceive in a million years. Dr. Zeus forms, paleontology forms, big monsters and tiny strangely shaped shells.

Could the forms currently living and those extinct on contemporary earth be the "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands singing with full voice?" Remember for God there is no death so extinct life forms would still be praising him. Dinosaurs and huge flying birds, ferns that we now find embedded in the layers of sedimentary rocks, shelled sea creatures that look strange to us and insects trapped in amber whose prodigy, though evolved, are still flying among us on earth. This week I read that a Tibetan monk found the jaw bone of a Neanderthal human in a cave in Tibet. Do you suppose he is among those voices praising God? He could be praising God for completing creation in the Worthy Lamb who stands slaughtered. How is your imagination now? Is it stretching? Is your mind looking upward?

The young and innocent have more fluid imaginations than we who have been extensively shaped by other people's thinking. I assembled a list of fish I saw in our old set of The World Book Encyclopedias. Wouldn't it be fun to ask our young disciples to use their imaginations to draw any of the following fish: The beautiful lion fish, the archer fish, the porcupine fish, the flying hatchet fish, the lantern fish and the deep-sea angler fish? All of the above, according to John the Seer, might be among the myriad creatures in the sea singing praises, "to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

John says many angels surrounded the throne. James Alison has an interesting definition for what angels are:

By angels I understand beings created by God in such a way that each one is a different genus. It is not as though there were a genus "angels," as there is the genus "birds," and then a division into different species—water birds, birds of prey, and so on. Each angel is a different genus, something completely without parallel. It seems to me that the whole sense of this traditional insistence is to oblige us to stretch our imaginations toward something of the extraordinary and unimagined diversity of beauties, of forms, of ways of being, which are completely beyond us. The underlying idea is that these creatures of God remind us of that which we cannot imagine directly at all: God's absolutely creative vitality and over-brimming, for whom creating unsuspected and breathlessly daring novelties continuously and dynamically is a mere nothing.

James goes on:

And we are not invited to imagine these things that are above as part of a game. Rather it is precisely at the times of darkness, of being crushed, of shadows, that they take on their greatest importance....To a situation of being despised here there corresponds an opening of the imagination that begins to understand a beauty and a worth "there" which is not yet understood "below."

Do you see why it is so important to look upward particularly when things around us look so dark? Tired of the news and strident voices, each competing with other strident voices for viewer ratings and viewer hearts? "Keep your eyes on the open heaven where the ascended Jesus sits at the right hand of the father."

I don't know who the elders are in this scene. Maybe they are the role models, the teachers, the example-setting leaders who have already died or been killed. With their urging I do find my mind expanding, opening up, being drawn toward heaven. I am relaxing and the tension-provoking cares of our conflictual world do seem to be melting away? I suppose you could call it "escapist devotion" but I don't think it is escapist at all. It's getting in touch with reality, with the bigger picture, with love and music, the arts, and human imagination that nurtures the soul and point toward the One on the throne.

Speaking of using our imaginations, in one of the most mind-wrenching reversals of imagery in all literature, in a text just before the text we read this morning from Revelation, Johns sees the lion of

Judah replaced by a Lamb standing as if it has been slaughtered. This is an image that boggles my mind and has become the center of my preaching. Allow me to read it:

Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. (Rev. 5:4-7)

Do you see what this is saying? The slain and alive Lamb of God has been substituted for the Lion of Judah. The savage lion of violence, suffering, and fear has already been supplanted by the Lamb who allowed himself to be slain to show us the mechanism of violence and then the resurrection shows us God's power over death through forgiving love. This set loose a new dynamic in history that continues its' redemptive work, even now, beneath the surface, on planet earth. Look up, believe, and persevere to the end when it will all become clear and we will be rewarded.

Today's reading from Revelation concludes with "And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshiped." Everything about this vision supports life, engenders vitality, stimulates imagination, and exists without reference to time. In this vision there is no "them" for all are included and singing in spontaneous praise. The images from the news and movies present themselves as real and they are in a way. But if we want to see what is ultimately real, we can look up and allow our God-given imagination to enliven our living. Thanks be to God. Amen.